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SUBJECT: IRAQ NEIGHBORS PROCESS: UNAMI PLANNING FOR
MINISTERIAL; SAYS NEW DIRECTION NEEDED

REF: BAGHDAD 3086

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Robert Ford. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: GOI preparations are moving forward for an expanded neighboring countries ministerial in Baghdad this fall but, according to a senior UNAMI advisor, the Neighbors Process is a weak mechanism that falls short of its goals. This is due, he said, to the lack of a coherent Iraqi regional strategy (a symptom of its own internal divisions), the absence of a unifying set of basic principles among Iraq and its neighbors, and deficiencies in the Iraqi MFA, both with regard to its own capacities and its weight relative to other key GOI players. UNAMI is drafting a concept paper with ideas on how to reinvigorate the Neighbors Process. Despite its deficiencies, he said, the process has value: it reinforces other bilateral efforts between Iraq and its neighbors and provides the foundation for a more vibrant regional dynamic in the future. End Summary.

The Task at Hand - Working Groups in October,
Ministerial in November/December

¶12. (C) Ambassador Gerard Sambrana, Special Political Adviser to SRSG di Mistura, told poloffs September 23 that the MFA's Neighbors Process events planning is on track. Confirming what Deputy Foreign Minister Labeed Abbawi told us on September 18 (septel), Sambrana (who heads the small UNAMI team responsible for assisting the MFA's Support Mechanism) confirmed that planning is underway for the Energy Working Group to meet in Istanbul in the October 11-14 time frame. Likewise, he said the Refugee and Security Working Groups would also meet in October, in Amman and Damascus, respectively, but that dates have not yet been set.

¶13. (C) Sambrana did not have specifics on the substance of the working group meetings as the host countries (Turkey, Jordan and Syria) had not yet shared draft programs with UNAMI. He attributed this to their desire to keep the process as decentralized as possible. This desire was evident last year during the prolonged negotiations to establish the "Support Mechanism" unit in the MFA and define UNAMI's role. Iraq's neighbors, he noted want to cede as little control over the Neighbors Process as possible to Baghdad. Notwithstanding this, Sambrana said planning for the working group meetings is underway and he expected to have more details to share soon. Deputy PolCouns alerted Sambrana to a possible scheduling conflict between the Energy Working group meeting in Istanbul (above) and an October 13 meeting in London organized by Iraq's Ministry of Oil that is to bring together 35 companies qualified to bid for the development of eight Iraqi oil and gas fields. Sambrana was unaware of this potential conflict and said he would raise it in an upcoming meeting with the Ministry of Oil.

¶14. (C) Turning to the upcoming Ministerial, Sambrana said the MFA is planning to hold it in November or December, but

has not yet developed a detailed agenda. He said UNAMI wants this Ministerial to do more than reiterate the statements of previous Ministerials. One way, he mused, would be to issue a "Declaration of Good Neighborliness" that would set forth a conceptual framework for future work in the Neighbors Process. Sambrana did not go into detail about what such a declaration would include, but said its aim would be to address the lack of agreed principles among participating countries that has, thus far, hindered the process. Foreign Minister Zebari's initial response to the idea of a "declaration" was positive, he said.

What's Wrong and What Needs to be Done

¶5. (C) On the Neighbors Process more broadly, Sambrana said the lack of a set of guiding principles is only one part of the equation. Because of internal ethnic and sectarian differences, the GOI itself does not have a coherent regional strategy. For example, there is a lack of consensus between Kurds and Arabs on what Iraqi policy should be towards Turkey, and even a lack of agreement amongst Iraq's Shia on how the Iraqi-Iranian bilateral relationship should evolve. These differences, he said, express themselves through different GOI actors and have led to a certain level of policy incoherence. Additionally, Iraq's neighbors each have different aims and priorities, some of which are completely at odds with each other.

¶6. (C) Furthermore, he noted, while the MFA and Foreign Minister Zebari are supportive of the Neighbors Process, the

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MFA lacks capacity and staff, is overwhelmed by other priorities, and is in a weak position vis-a-vis other key GOI actors. Sambrana related that UNAMI has heard that Zebari has been progressively sidelined over the past several months, further weakening the MFA's position. As a possible remedy, he suggested that Prime Minister Maliki and his key advisers take on a larger role, thus ensuring the GOI political buy-in necessary for the process to be effective.

A Changing Landscape

¶7. (C) Finally, Sambrana noted, Iraq's relations with its neighbors, and the Neighbors Process itself, will evolve as the role of the U.S. and the coalition enters a new phase, and as Iraq takes on greater responsibilities. What that means for the Neighbors Process is still to be determined. One way to accommodate these changing dynamics, Sambrana offered, would be to replace the current working groups with "forums" that would broaden the scope of discussion and expand the pool of participants beyond governments. A forum on political security, for example, could focus on more than simply border security. Refugees could be one of several issues taken up in a social affairs forum. An economic affairs forum could address issues such as trade and economic cooperation. Deputy PolCouns expressed concern that expanding the scope beyond the current working group format would likely be hard for the MFA, given the difficulty it is having managing the current working groups. What is needed, he countered, is a process that facilitates targeted action on concrete issues.

Comment

¶8. (C) The Neighbors Process should be more results-oriented and a review of its functioning is in order as we approach a new ministerial. However, broadening the scope and mandate in the manner Sambrana described would simply overwhelm MFA's current capacities. Increasing the

role of the Prime Minister's Office in the Neighbors Process would not improve Iraqi efficiency, hinder efforts to build Iraqi MFA capacity and further exacerbate tensions between the Prime Ministry and the Foreign Ministry. We will continue to discuss with Iraqi officials and UNAMI about how to extract maximum advantage from the Neighbors Process as GOI planning for the November/December ministerial moves forward.

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